

Looking Ahead, Looking Back: A Review of Works by 15 Artists Organised by Fergana Art Space (7th February–29th March 2015)

Sarena Abdullah

School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA

sarena.abdullah@usm.my

When it was announced through Facebook and email blasts that there will be an upcoming exhibition at Fergana Art Space, I looked forward to it as Fergana's previous exhibition on Ismail Hashim's photographic works was presented in an interesting and well-thought out curatorial manner. Although I missed the launching of the exhibition on 7th February 2015, I managed to visit the Looking Ahead: 15 Malaysian Artist exhibition a week later and even brought students from my class in mid-March, with Mr Ho Fan Choon, who is the Manager, giving us a guided tour of the exhibition (Photo 1).



Photo 1 Guided exhibition tour given by Mr. Ho Fan Choon from Fergana Art Space to students from the Fine Arts Section, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The exhibition *Looking Ahead: 15 Malaysian Artist* was organised by Fergana Art Space at Whiteaways Arcade in George Town from 7th February until 29th March 2015. It was a group exhibition in collaboration with OUR Art Projects and Teratak Nuomar that featured selected works from 15 Malaysian artists from various generations. Therefore, the show highlighted a wide range of artists, some with their recent works and others with older pieces that have made a significant mark in the development of Malaysian art history. The exhibition consists of various media such as drawings, paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs and even performance art.

Stepping into the gallery, a large wall with the title of the exhibition *Looking Ahead: 15 Malaysian Artist* included the names of the selected artists—Ahmad Fuad Osman, Aishah Baharuddin, Chan Kok Hooi, chi too, Ismail Zain, Chris Chong Chang Fui, Lim Kok Teong, Gan Siong King, Mad Anuar Ismail, Kamal Mustafa, Nirmala Dutt Shanmunghalingam, Ismail Hashim, Samsudin Wahab Sulaiman and Yee I-Lann.

In the main exhibition space, my eyes were drawn to the work of Ahmad Fuad Osman titled *This Is Certainly Not Like We Thought It Was* (2014) (Photo 2). Known for his installation works on social commentaries during the 1990s, Ahmad Fuad Osman has since focused on appropriation, as represented in his works such as *An Eye for an Eye will Make the World Go Blind* (2003) and his *Recollection of Long Lost Memories* (2007). With regards to his artistic practices in the last 15 years, I find that *This is Certainly Not What We Think It Was* (2014) proposes quite a different trajectory from his previous approaches. The installation was constructed using a stuffed crow, water in a glass container, pebbles and books, which



Photo 2 Ahmad Fuad Osman, *This is Certainly Not Like We Thought It Was* (2014). Books, stuffed crow, glass water container, pebbles (Dimensions variable).

immediately reminds me of Aesop's fables, *The Crow and the Pitcher* or *Burung Gagak dan Kendi* as it is known in the Malay version of the tale. The fable tells of a thirsty crow that uses his mind in solving the challenge of bringing to surface a body of water that sits at the bottom of a long and deep glass jar. In this installation, Ahmad Fuad Osman recreates, or rather appropriates this scene except that in his installation he positions the crow on top of a highly stacked set of art books, the majority of which are western ones. Perhaps this installation symbolises the artist's belief in the need for a quest for knowledge for all of us, including art practitioners. Such a metaphor could be inferred from Fuad's reconfiguration of the notion of water in association with thirst, the thirst for knowledge or a desire for information which is represented in the crow's attempt in reaching the water supported by a stack of thick introductory art books.

Besides Ahmad Fuad Osman's *This is Certainly Not What We Think It Was* (2014) and Aisyah Baharuddin's mixed-media installation *Mengendap* (2014), the exhibition also includes the visually "quieter" works of Chris Chong Chan Fui, Yee I-Lann and Chan Kok Hooi. Though visually "quieter," Chris Chong Chan Fui and Yee I-Lann reflect a more sophisticated and complex visual articulation that differ from locally graduated artists. Chris Chong Chan Fui's drawings and Yee I-Lann's photomontages need to be read under the purview of deconstruction and postcolonial theory. Unlike the works of Ahmad Fuad Osman and Aisyah Baharuddin, the pieces by Chris Chong and Yee I-Lann are informed by critical theories, reflecting the currents of contemporary art practices, especially in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand and in various biennales and triennales around the world.

The general impression of both Chris Chong's *Pit#7 S Nymphoides Indica (Lotus)* and *Pit#19 Ophrys Sphegodes (Spider Orchid)*, is that they are professional botanical renderings of a plant. But in closer inspection, the subject of the drawing in "*Pit#7 S Nymphoides Indica (Lotus)*", what seems to be a water lily does not have submerged roots and floating leaves. The "water lily" appears to have a sturdy stem that holds the flowers and the leaves. This

raises suspicions about the exact species of the plant. After further examination, the work is actually a botanical-style rendering of a bouquet of artificial flowers!

Both *Pit#7 S Nymphoides Indica (Lotus)* and *Pit#19 Ophrys Sphegodes (Spider Orchid)* are part of his larger "Botanic" series commissioned by the National Heritage Board, Singapore. They are rendered according to the convention of traditional botanical illustrations, which is an approach popular during the 18th and 19th centuries used by scientists to disseminate and study plants. Botanical illustrations are traditionally made from observation of natural flora, where the forms, colours and details of the plant are rendered in great detail for referencing and understanding plant species. Chris Chong's illustration, however, while depicting similar formal and technical qualities to botanical illustrations, are derived from artificial flowers instead. Perhaps it is not too far to read that these drawings deconstructed botanical illustrations or what the reality is today and are also a reflection of the artificiality that often defines contemporary culture today. Artificiality and simulacrum have been so widely accepted as replacements for, and supplements to nature, that we are not aware what is fact and what is not.

Old Pants As New Condo and *Old Photo Series: Golden Branches, Jade Leaves* by Chan Kok Hooi were two small works that were selected for this exhibition. Chan Kok Hooi is one of the current artists who seems to be very illustrative and miniature-like, similar to those by Haslin Ismail and Shamsuddin Wahab. The exhibited works are small in scale by today's standard where big works are appreciated due to the impact that they make on the audience. Nevertheless, *Old Pants As New Condo* defies our expectation of what art and art materials should be. Chan Kok Hooi produces an acrylic painting of an apartment seamlessly on some used jeans. The work demonstrates that unsuspected art materials can produce surprising work that combines elements of humour, cynicism and even a certain level of cuteness!

Yee I-Lann's photomontages were images from the collections of Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (Photo 3) that consist of eight digital collages referencing the history of photography in relation to the development of colonialism in Southeast Asia. Yee I-Lann's

photomontage presents a display of power that existed in colonial times through the pictures and she did this with an emphatic act of subversion. This can be seen clearly in "*Picturing Power #3: Wherein one nods with political sympathy and says I understand you better than you understand yourself, I'm just here to help you help yourself.*" The artist took the liberty of manipulating the images taken during the colonial period, to expose the mindset of the colonisers and address the imperial domination of the land in the past history. The works juxtapose the image of a fully uniformed white man, sitting in front of a small side table, arrays of photos of locals were juxtaposed repeatedly behind him. At his side, is another local man, slightly bigger in scale in comparison to the hundreds behind him. In one of the works for example, juxtaposition of photos of natives were lined up behind one of their oppressors, portraying life in the colonies at that time, an era of dogmatic coercion.

In these digital collages, we can see that the titles play a big role in giving clues to the visual narratives informed by postcolonial theories introduced by scholars like Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. Those who have studied postcolonial theory might be able to fully appreciate the irony, sarcasm, and humour embedded within these photomontages.



Photo 3 View of Yee I-Lann's *Picturing Power Series* (2013). Gicleé print on Hahnemühle paper.

In the same gallery space, the quietness and seriousness of Yee I-Lann's work was fortunately balanced by chi too's *Longing #6 A.K.A Main Kejar-kejar Dengan Rakyat*. A small rotating black speaker on a pedestal produces an annoying audio Ra-ta-ta repetitively that echoes in the space. It reminds me of the chasing scene from the cartoon, *The Road Runner*. The message or idea of *Longing for Putrajaya* by the same artist, however, is not so clear (Photo 4). A simple, small table with increasing numbers across horizontal lines, perhaps serves as a form of scale of achievement towards having power. Unlike other artists, chi too is a multidisciplinary artist who often explores humour and satire in his works, as reflected in these two works. The artist apparently prefers not to give any clue, either visual or auditory, and leaves his works to our own interpretation and imagination.



Photo 4 chi too, *Longing for Putrajaya* (2012). Banquet table (45 × 180 × 90 cm).

The curatorial approach in this exhibition needs to be highlighted. This is because while Malaysian artists have produced significant works, and while these selected artists have exhibited internationally, curatorial approaches undertaken by private and institutional galleries are often disappointing. This is evident, for example, in retrospective shows at the National Visual Art Gallery such as Amron Omar's *Pertarungan* Exhibition, and the latest Choong Kam Kow's retrospective, the selection of art works were not done properly resulting in arrays of works hung, without proper contextualisation to help the audience to fully appreciate the strength of the artist's practice.

The strength of *Looking Ahead* is actually in how the art works were exhibited in a small space in Whiteaways Arcade, known formerly as Whiteaways & Laidlaw Building, which is an elegant colonial-era building along Beach Street. Perhaps in tandem with the spirit

of the gallery to provide and support a pluralist art scene, works by well-known senior artists who have made their mark in the Malaysian art-scene such as Nirmala Shanmughalingam, Sulaiman Esa, the late photographer Ismail Hashim and visionary artists like the late Ismail Zain were featured rather towards the end of the exhibition space. The main space highlighted the works by Ahmad Fuad Osman, Mustafa Kamal, Chris Chong Chan Fui and Chan Kok Hui, the second gallery space featured those by Yee I-Lann, chi too, Gan Siong King and the third space, which is a small interior connecting towards the final space hosted the aforementioned senior artists.

So, as you enter the corridor that leads you to the final exhibition space, an array of works by senior artists were installed on the walls such as those by Ismail Zain, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam and Shamsuddin Wahab. It is quite interesting to see the works by these artists somewhat interacting with each other. Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam's *Bosnia Series* was produced based on her empathy of the Bosnian war between 1992 and 1995. In this work, the outline of the dead bodies was drawn with simple brush strokes and thick black bands, both at the top and the bottom part of the work. These swaths of vertical or horizontal bands also seem to be pertinent in the works of her contemporaries such as Ismail Zain and Redza Piyadasa during the 1980s. The dominating black, white and gray were played against each other to create a somber mood in this series so as to create a sense of sadness, somberness and helplessness in the work.

The political nuance of chi too's and Yee I-Lann's works were echoed in the third space of the exhibition through Shamsudin Wahab's prints. *Malapetaka* (2015) and *Gergasi Selat* (2015) in the forms of etching and aquatint on paper, remind us of Honore Daumier, the French printmaker's realist prints. Samsudin's use of etching and aquatint in these works are quite apt as these works seem to adhere to the satires of Daumier: a group of human figures of men, women and children with various facial expressions to insinuate the state of catastrophe and distress and the word *malapetaka* (catastrophe) written at the top of *Malapetaka*.

In *Gergasi Selat*, a pair of hands with long, crooked and pointed fingernails seems to be playing with items such as dice, poker cards, a bridge, heavy machineries, construction materials, water pipes and even robots. This work simply suggests that there are always people in power who manipulate the unseen mechanism of society. For example, we are governed, our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men (and women) we have never heard of. Whether we like it or not, we either consciously or subconsciously cooperate in this manner in almost every aspect of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, social conduct and even our thinking.

Ismail Zain's work at the other end of the wall was selected from his significant Digital Collage Series. This particular series holds a very significant place in the context of Malaysian Art History as it is a pioneering effort in the use of computer print in art. Therefore, it is rather interesting and rare to see works such as *Lalat Makan Hati Mastura*, *Selamat Hari Valentine*, *Bruce Springsteen*, *Phantom* and *The Eye Has Veil*, all produced in 1988, still available for sale in the current art market. The decision to include Ismail Hashim's *Sleeping Beauties* is quite a surprise as a retrospective exhibition on this important artist is also currently being held in Balai Seni Visual Negara (BSVN) in Kuala Lumpur, also organised by Fergana Art.

To re-cap my experience of *Looking Ahead: 15 Malaysian Artist*, my tour began with Ahmad Fuad Osman's installation, and ended with a mixed-media installation by Aisyah Baharuddin titled *Mengendap* (2014) (Photo 5).



Photo 5 View of Aisyah Baharuddin's mixed media installation entitled *Mengendap* (2014).

Aisyah Baharuddin's *Mengendap* (2014) took up most of the floor space in the last section of the art space. The work consists of a main image of a veiled woman with a pair of horns, attended by a few other paintings that make up the whole installation. I was informed that there was a performance art titled *Barah* on the opening day that was part of the work. There are elements of naiveté in the installation, which is not surprising as Aisyah Baharuddin and Intan Rafiza are two performance artists in Malaysia who often reference their own personal experiences as women and mothers.

Mad Anuar Ismail's *Pahlawan* series and Kamal Mustafa's *Waiting Room* (2013) and a few of Sulaiman Esa's latest works were also presented in the same space. Sulaiman Esa's

work in this show, however, seems to be in stark contrast to the Islamic aesthetic that he upholds in his practices during the 1980s and 1990s. It is quite interesting to observe this turning point in Sulaiman Esa's art at this point in time, although I am not quite sure if it is going to be an important contribution to the Malaysian art history in this millennial decade or if it is just going to be a footnote.

It is hoped that Fergana Art will further attempt to play a bigger role in fostering and supporting a more plural and diverse Malaysian art scene that was once espoused by Valentine Willie Art Gallery during the 1990s. With the two previous exhibitions of Ismail Hashim's *Unpack Repack* exhibited in the same venue and concurrently another extensive show being exhibited in the National Visual Art Gallery, Fergana is indeed serious in contributing to the development of Malaysian art. Hopefully it is able to do so not only in terms of selling and promoting commercial works but also by contextualising and presenting Malaysian art in a very meaningful and refreshing way.

Perhaps this is just a small exhibition in Penang but this exhibition without doubt enriches the curatorial strategy in presenting and contextualising artists and artworks, which reflects Fergana's aim to nurture and support a multifaceted art scene in Malaysia and in Penang specifically. The presentation of this exhibition provides possible links to the socio-cultural and even environmental concerns of the past, current or the near future as the selected works deal with personal concerns and identity, current discourses, either real or imaginary, all of which are based on reflective ideas and self-consciousness and actualisation. At least, in the context of the Penang audience, this exhibition can be deemed as different in comparison to other local exhibitions often rooted in sentimentalised aesthetics, with heritage themes largely working in the service of nostalgia of the old Penang charm.